



FOR TWO

By Diane Mettler

Ever wished you could grow your own cup of tea? Just plant a *Camellia sinensis*. Victor Vesely, co-owner of the Teafarm in North Cowichan, B.C., says all tea is derived from this one plant; it's the different processes that create green, white, oolong, or black leaf teas.

The Teafarm, which is north of Victoria, was until very recently the northern most region to grow tea (Scotland recently took the lead). Vincent, whose passion for tea began in the 1980s when he got a chance to deeply explore Japan and China, is the ideal person to bring the tea experience to B.C.

In fact, tea was even how he met his wife, Margit Nellemann, a ceramist and co-owner of the Teafarm. "While in Vancouver [B.C.], I discovered Margit's work on a table. I met the bowl before I met her. I courted her with a tea ceremony, or Victor's version of a come to my place and I'll make you tea. The rest is a marriage between tea and clay."



The Experience

The couple purchased a farm in 2003 and initially grew herbs, flowers, and various vegetables, but their passion for tea and clay evolved until today their converted barn is a studio and tea drinker's paradise. Outside the barn grow two hundred *Camellia sinensis* plants with many more ready to go in.

Margit and Victor wear many hats: purveyors of fine tea; artisan tea blenders; tea suppliers to restaurants and retail shops; creators of unique tea events; ceramic artist and *Camellia sinensis* growers.

The Challenge

Victor, who describes himself as "a person who likes a challenge," planted the 200 plants in 2010, hoping they would take. They did take, despite a bumpy start. For starters, he covered the plants to protect them from snow and -15 Celsius (5 Fahrenheit) temperatures. But when the snow fell, it crushed the plants with the protective covering.

"The learning was, of course, that the snow itself insulates the plants. I'm not a horticulturist. I'm just a guy who wings it, but I'm learning to do less of that. I've learned if you can protect the roots from freezing, and other things, you have some healthy plants."

Tea Tips

Victor has dispensed with the covers and now focuses on mulch. "We don't use any chemical fertilizers or pesticides, so we use very clean, non-glued cardboard for the heavier patches, and occasionally newsprint. We also mulch with the bark and chips that we create here and bog hay, which is rye zone. It doesn't

have any seedlings. It allows us to keep in the moisture, which is key when it gets up to 30 and 38 degrees Celsius (100 Fahrenheit). And it cuts down on the weeding."

Victor and Margit use a companion planting of calendula, which they discovered is an effective pest control—including keeping deer away. Although *Camellia sinensis* like full sun, the calendula also offers a little protection during the hottest months.



Victor's advice for those considering growing and harvesting tea is to take the plants out of their pots and put them in acidic soil with good drainage. Although *Camellia* is

pruned to a bush shape, it's a tree with roots that go down about six feet.

In the end though, the couple says for them it's not about the volume harvested, but the experience. "That's what we offer up here," says Vincent. "A very unique experience that is centuries old—the marriage between tea and clay."



For more information on the teas, events, or Margit's pottery, visit www.teafarm.ca.

The couple also discovered that the extreme temperatures help create great tasting tea. "It stresses the plant out and will therefore create the flavor that we're looking for," says Victor. "In fact, there's one area in Assam that they actually actively go and break some of the stems to replicate an elephant or other animal running through the fields."

Tough Love Harvesting

The Teafarm's plants are almost mature and will soon be ready to harvest, which involves trimming off the new growth.